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CENTRAL CIRCULAR DECORATION
WISCONSIN STATE CAPITOL. BY HUGO BALLIN

HUGO BALLIN'S DECORATIONS FOR THE CAPITOL AT MADISON

BY LOUIS UNTERMEYER

THIS is an epoch of revolt; formlessness is no longer a crime—it is apparently considered a flaming virtue. More than that, it has become the hallmark of genius; and poor indeed is the artist who has not “sounded a new note” in this or that branch of endeavor. The Art of Painting is the worst offender in this regard—it covers itself with a tangled robe of words because it is bare of

ideas. In order to conceal its weakness it has filched the externals of all the other arts, their *patois*—even their technical terms—and the enthusiast speaks glibly of “architectural planes,” “tone progressions,” “color chords,” “irregular rhythms” *ad infinitum*. * * * Modern Art talks so insistently because, for the most part, it has nothing to say. We are grateful, therefore, when we find an art-



LABOR AND THE SPIRITS OF RAIN AND SUNSHINE

ist who has no time to explain his work because his work explains him. Such a man is Hugo Ballin—born about thirty-one years ago—whose decorations for the Executive Room in the State Capitol at Madison, Wisconsin, are, in the truest sense of the words, “new notes” in American decorative art.

This State Capitol is remarkable in many ways, but perhaps most remarkable for the fact that it cost five million dollars and the total population of Madison is a little more than 20,000! It was designed by George B. Post & Sons; its impressive dome can be seen miles away from the city, and the artists chosen, not by competition, by the way, to decorate the building, were Blashfield, Cox, Alexander and Hugo Ballin. The Executive Room, a miracle of rich porphyry and gold, is Venetian in style, being modeled after and adapted from the Paolo Veronese room in the Ducal Palace at Venice. The ornamental work is in Elmer Garnsey's best manner, and the whole room is, in fine, a splendid setting for the glowing canvases that Mr. Ballin has made for it.

Some of the paintings are reproduced herewith, but the thing which gives them life and power, their very *raison d'être*, is missing. It is in his color that Mr. Ballin has in truth struck the “new note,” for he brings to these quiet-looking designs a lavish beauty of tone and a sen-

suousness that his Italian training has imparted. It is this which makes his canvases throb; it is this restrained riot of color that makes even the most conventional of them different from the stereotyped set of mythological lay-figures. Take, for instance, the central circular decoration. Deep blues and yellows (which color-scheme runs, like a theme, through the entire series, binding them) are the predominant tones and tend to emphasize the dazzling whiteness of the girlish figure of Wisconsin. About her are the classical attributes—Commerce by Sea (represented by a weather-beaten prophet with sextant and trident), Commerce by Land (the nude leaning on a bale and holding the lactometer—for Wisconsin prides itself on its milk inspection), Labor (his modern garb, a splendid, intentionally incongruous note) and a wonderful creature in heavy yellow with a brilliant peacock sash, representing the fruits of horticulture and agriculture. The flag is introduced simply, almost unnoticeably. From the ceiling above the columns its red and white bars depend, while the under-dress of Wisconsin reveals its star-scattered blue. But though the color may be Italian, nothing could be more American than the chief character in this group.

In the large panel “Labor and the Spirits of Rain and Sunshine” the two



THE SEEKER OF KNOWLEDGE AT THE SHRINE OF WISDOM

elements are distinctly American in opposition to the immigrant type of dark-browed Slav with high cheek-bones. In color alone this canvas is a revelation—Rain and Sunshine are a harmonious contradiction of tones, the blue-green of one and the opalescent shimmer of the other being repeated throughout the sky and landscape in contrast to the heavy brown and red of the seated figure—weighty and dull.

Mr. Ballin delights in this physical and mental contrast. The naïve meeting of Minerva and the sweet “young girl graduate” is as daring in treatment as it is unconventional in idea. Here is no throned effigy of Wisdom attended by an assembly of kindred, meaningless spirits, carefully “placed” and arranged to form a hackneyed and semicircular pattern. But here is Minerva herself, even to the plastered locks; aloof, almost with a sculpture-quality; and to her, out of a singing valley, comes this young spirit of confident womanhood—American to the tip of her turned-up nose and the ends of her wilful hair.

American, too, is the “Spirit of Modern Invention.” No cold abstraction this, but an intense figure clothed in all the shifting colors of a summer sunset, her face toward the skies, and on her brow firmness blended with the gaze of the visionary. Her compass measures the

world; the modern factory and the “wireless” are her manifestations, while an aeroplane, symbol of the future, swoops out into space. * * *

No facile American illustrator has ever created anything more typical of this country than the reddish-haired, cool, white-shirtwaisted girl who, with leveling rod and transit (a Wisconsin transit by the bye), represents “The Spirit of Pioneering;” and it is not alone the features, but the spirit which is typically American. Her back to the prairie schooner, she looks forward into the dawn—a dawn of yellow promise—and all the dreams and prophecies of a new day are reflected in her face.

“The Spirit of the Arts” alone has a countenance which is not strictly local—her beauty is the possession of all the world; still, there is a distinctly American note in the replica of Saint Gaudens’ “Puritan” which represents Sculpture. The other arts in this decoration are obvious and yet unconventionally placed—a palette for Painting, masks for Drama, a scroll for Literature, a portative organ for Music—she wears the crown of Architecture in her hair and Handicraft is represented by an intricate tapestry of black and red which serves as a background. As a combination of color alone this canvas is possibly the most daringly beautiful of the set. The auburn hair is

set against a background of deep vermillion—the statue (a fine tribute to Saint Gaudens, by the way) is set off by a contrast of green bronze against iridescent purple and lavender silk—while the palette is rich with blues and greens. * * * There are other canvases already finished—notably “The Spirit of Religious Toleration” and “The Spirit of Charity,” to say nothing of a smaller group of panels.

All of these go to fill the spacious ceiling. For the side walls Mr. Ballin has in preparation an even more ambitious set which will illustrate the history and progress of the State. He has chosen for this purpose such subjects as will combine fact and the wild poetry of imagination. For instance, there is a half-finished “Nicolet Meeting the Wisconsin (Winnebago) Indians” (Nicolet

who thought he would strike Japan by going West, and, hoping to win the natives, dressed in a grotesque headgear and a Mandarin jacket!)—a painting grotesque in idea but lyric in its interpretation. Then there is the stoical “Red Bird giving himself up to Major Whistler” which marks the beginning of the end of internecine strife in 1827. * * * Altogether this room will be one of the most striking things in America; it will take rank with the very finest imaginative thought we have produced, and in sheer force of color will surpass them all. It will answer, in the highest sense, the peculiar demands of decoration—a thing which some of our most inspired sets of paintings do not begin to fulfil. These paintings are both a justification and a prophecy of Mr. Ballin as a decorator!

WHAT IS IMPRESSIONISM?

BY DUNCAN C. PHILLIPS, JR.

WHAT does Impressionism in painting really mean? After some forty years of agitated discussion, there exists in the public mind a confusion amounting to bewilderment in regard to the proper answer to that question. The reason is not far to seek. Critics have been provocative and entertaining, according to their fashion, with a truly journalistic contempt for any short cuts to the truth. They have played with their subject as a cat will play with a mouse to prolong the pleasurable excitement. George Moore, for instance, pounced upon the truth when he said that “Impressionism penetrates all true painting” and only “in its most modern sense signifies the rapid noting of elusive appearance.” Yet he allowed the thought to escape that he might play with it upon another occasion. What is the result? Ask the average well-informed man you meet what Impressionism in painting really means, and he will reply somewhat as follows—“Oh—it’s a new-fan-

gled French way of painting everything light and airy, and of spilling all the colors of the rainbow—helter-skelter—into the same picture.”

While resenting the flippancy of the gentleman’s manner, the most enthusiastic critics of the new spectral vision could hardly quarrel with the truth of this statement. When urged to a definition of the same subject, Camille Mauclore proceeds to industriously describe the technique of color spots invented by Claude Monet in his attempt to render the shimmer of aerial vibration. Now this method is a typical achievement of the modern mind. Suffice it here to say that, successful as it has been in producing upon canvas subtle verities of light and air, it is at best a brave but crude beginning and only an experiment in the evolution of realistic painting. So engrossed is the painter with his melted outlines, his divided tones, his colored shadows, that his picture too closely resembles a scientific demonstration. “Col-